

PUTTING PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

WE recognise that good practices are based on sound principles. Good practices, at home or in school, have the following features:

Practice 1: Starting from the child

The starting point for all adults working with young children is getting to know them: their abilities, interests and dispositions. Part of this process involves observing them carefully. This is important for several reasons:

- planning meaningful activities
- pitching the level of the activities
- supporting the child to the next level
- identifying learning strengths and potential, problems and difficulties.

It is important to bear in mind that children differ according to the rate at which they acquire skills and ideas. Children should therefore not be pushed to work at a level beyond their ability, and should not be compared with others. Children look to their teachers and parents for affirmation. Adult expectations – especially those of parents – can act to either motivate their children to rise to challenges or dampen their enthusiasm for learning. It is important, therefore, for adults to pitch their expectations appropriately, so as to safeguard the child's self esteem, which is very fragile and precious.

Early identification leads to interventions that help the parents, teachers and children cope with the effects of the problem. The people most appropriately placed to identify whether a child has a problem are parents and teachers. One way to find out if children are encountering learning difficulties is to observe them closely. Look out for instances when the child is not developing in line with other children. Monitor the child over a period of time, giving as much guidance as possible. If the problem persists, seek professional help.

When help is offered at an early stage, it is often easier to resolve any difficulty the child may have. Therefore parents should be encouraged to seek professional help as early as possible.

Practice 2: Fostering a positive learning climate

Meaningful learning will only result when children are encouraged to seek their own answers to questions in an environment that invites experimentation and exploration. Adults should ensure that all children feel included, secure and valued. The language used by adults should be encouraging, inviting children to ask questions and to take risks. They also need to ensure that children are guided to start taking responsibility for their own actions and choices. Parents and teachers should work together in an atmosphere of mutual respect within which children gain confidence and emotional security.

Practice 3: Preparing the learning environment

The physical arrangement of a room can influence dispositions toward the activities carried out in the place. It can invite exploration and experimentation, or it can stifle creativity and restrict imagination. As such, the classroom arrangement can have a powerful effect on teaching and learning. The physical layout influences the type of learning that is going to take place. For example, the arrangement of tables and chairs with a teacher seated in the front of the room will probably result in teacher-directed and table-bound activities where children are passive and wait to be told what to do.

Children need ample opportunities and encouragement to explore and try out ideas freely and independently, at their own time, and at their own pace. This can be done at learning centres set up around the room. Activities designed for these centres should encourage exploration, experimentation, cooperation and decision-making. The processes of active and social learning should be the focus of the planning, rather than the end product.

Practice 4: Planning and structuring learning activities

The adult has to be clear about the purpose of the activity, and ways in which the child's involvement may be sustained. If the desired outcome of the activity is unclear, learning may not be optimised. It is therefore advisable to identify just one or two objectives for each activity, rather than try to cover too much all at once. Therefore activities should provide for rich and stimulating experiences.

Learning takes place when adults:

- ✚ plan experiences that are relevant, imaginative, motivating, enjoyable and challenging
- ✚ make effective use of incidental learning opportunities that arise from everyday events and routines in order to teach skills and knowledge
- ✚ guide children in understanding the purpose of the activities
- ✚ use language that is rich, clear and grammatically correct. It is important to recognize that what is said and how the adult speaks is one of the ways of introducing new vocabulary and helping children to develop the language for thinking
- ✚ interact with and support children in a way that positively affects children's attitudes to learning
- ✚ identify the next step in children's learning to plan how to help children make progress.

The planned activities should involve children by encouraging them to:

- ✚ learn from each other
- ✚ learn through movement and all their senses
- ✚ have time to explore ideas and interests in depth
- ✚ feel secure, which helps them to become confident learners
- ✚ learn in different ways and at different rates
- ✚ make links in their learning
- ✚ create and engage in imaginative play that promotes the development and use of language.

Practice 5: Choosing and designing materials

The best resources and materials tend to be:

- ✚ easily and readily available;
- ✚ used daily in common tasks;
- ✚ non-restrictive, allowing children to be as creative as they can be;
- ✚ stimulating;
- ✚ of a wide-ranging variety of media;
- ✚ engaging to young children, and able to sustain their interest.

In view of this, it is good practice to make available blank sheets of paper and writing instruments such as pencils, crayons, charcoal sticks and paints for children to independently and freely express themselves.

The display of materials is also a means of making learning accessible to the children. Technology (computers, television, digital cameras, etc.) plays a significant role in all aspects of daily life today. While there may be potential benefits from the use of technology by young children, technology should supplement rather than replace highly valued early childhood activities which promote collaborative play, learning and creativity. The adult would ideally determine whether the specific use of technology is age appropriate, individually appropriate, culturally appropriate, and relevant to the program content. Worksheets and activity sheets are not meant to be the goal of the instruction, but to consolidate what has been taught.

Practice 6: Observing and monitoring children's development

The only way to teach a child is to know him or her well. Only in knowing children well can we respond appropriately to them. Observing and recording children's progress is vital for program planning and evaluation. If adults are to meet the developmental needs of children, they will need to refer to these records and observations on a regular basis.

Observations of children's progress and development can be kept in a portfolio containing, for example, their drawings, paintings, sketches, writings, or mark making and printouts of computer-generated projects. Profiling and record keeping in this manner also provide evidence to inform parents of their children's progress.

Strong partnerships between teachers and parents can yield valuable insights into each child's development. Teachers can then use observations – both from home and what is done in the kindergarten – to identify learning priorities and plan relevant learning experiences for each child. Parents and teachers can also match their observations to their expectations.

In this way, we can help children realize their full potential, and inspire them to become accomplished and life-long learners.